

NOTES ON BRAHMANIC GODS  
IN THERAVĀDIN CAMBODIA \*

Theravāda was implanted in the 13th-14th c. in Cambodia, a country which had had already century-long associations with the Indian civilization, and particularly the main religions originating in the subcontinent. Cambodia's art and epigraphy represent the main source of documents on Brahmanism with its different sects, and Buddhism likewise (Mahāyāna and Hīnayāna). On the Brahmanic side, śaivism and vaiṣṇavism shared the favour of the country's rulers since the dawn of history, alternatively, without ever excluding each other. In the meantime, Mahāyāna was lurking everywhere, mainly with the cult of Lokeśvara, and culminated in the reign of Jayavarman VII (end of 12th c.) with the cult of Prājñāpāramitā.

In addition, epigraphy gives us at random detailed accounts of minor Indian beliefs and cults, such as Tantrism, the cult of Agni and the Sacred Fire, of Gaṇeśa, of Sarasvatī, the goddess of eloquence, and other goddesses (Umā/Pārvatī, Lakṣmī...).

On the other hand, the epigraphy has not supplied information on two fields of religious beliefs and practices which are still current and very popular at present, to wit Magic and Worship of natural entities such as the sun, the moon, the wind, etc. As an axiom, though, we must posit that no cultural element of our times has come out of the blue. Consequently, modern popular

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\* CNRS, Paris. Ancient Cambodia: 6th-13th c.; Mediaeval Cambodia: 14th-18th c.; Modern Cambodia: 19th c.-date.

religion with its beliefs and myths, is rooted in the remote past, viz. the culture of ancient Cambodia, although, as just stated, it was not recorded in texts.

Besides, it must be pointed out in the same vein that history has never reported any clash between different religious trends current in ancient Cambodia. This remarkable fact has induced many a scholar to speak — rightly so — of « syncretism ». This could be more plainly translated by « a long-standing, happy, if not harmonious, co-existence of various religious systems ».

Then, a complete change occurred in the epigraphy at the turn of the 13th c., with inscriptions in Pāli related to Theravāda. This was followed by more and more documents of the same nature, and Sanskrit ceased to be used in literary composition.

Theravāda took roots at all levels of the society, as now evidenced by all documents available: a remarkable consensus, indeed. Khmer people professed an unconditioned *saddhā* toward « the Master », i.e. the Buddha. And one cannot but marvel at the fact that meek Theravāda managed to take over such a rich old culture without turbulent alterations or disastrous chaos. In such circumstances, the question arised in some people's mind, naturally, as to what has become of the pre-Theravādin Indian heritage in Cambodia. The answer was not an easy one, indeed it required more than a scholar with some insight to join efforts and investigate first-hand in different fields, to check and sort out collected data, then to build them up into a system. This has been made possible only during the last two decades, and this breakthrough in research threw a tremendous light on a modern type of « syncretism » in our times. Most of the ancient Brahmanic gods are well present in the new religious system; they have been incorporated therein through Buddhism, literature and magic, and lexical creation.

### I. *Buddhist Recuperation*

Two of the chief Brahmanic gods were neatly taken over by Theravāda faith, i.e. Indra and Brahma. Nearly nothing was left from their past lofty and impressive features. But these were

substituted for by highest ranks in the Buddhist cosmology. Indeed, they were assimilated with their Buddhist namesakes, with the result that their names were carried over, untouched, into the new system, and prefixed by the sacred headword *brah*<sup>1</sup>.

1. Indra became, in the Theravādin people's consciousness, the ruler of the two first heavenly worlds, i.e. the *Cātummahārājika* and the *Tāvātimsa*, « World of the Thirty-three », or better the *Traitriṇs* as in nation-wide usage<sup>2</sup>. Besides the original name *Indr*, pron. /en/, he is also called *Kosiy* /kosey/, or else *Brah Indr-Kosiy*<sup>3</sup>, and by authors — only in literature — *Sakka* and *Maghavan*.

He is the most faithful servant of the Buddha and the strongest upholder of the Dhamma. He lives in the *Bejayant*-palace with a large retinue of beautiful gods and goddesses, owns the charming *Nanda-Udyān* and the famous assembly-hall *Sudhammā*. He shows an unfaltering concern in human affairs. Thus, when a problem arises on the earth and wants badly solving, the god feels his throne heated up. He, then, « opens his divine eyes » to catch a glimpse of the bad spot. Once informed of the situation, he never fails to travel down to human world, under different disguises, to help the good, the innocent, and chastise the wicked ones.

This aspect of Indra's role vis-à-vis humans was well cultivated by both scholars and the grass-roots quite early in Cambodian Theravāda's history. It reached its climax sometime between the fall of Angkor (15th c.) and the birth of a minor epic poem, « Poem of Angkor-Vat », dated 1620 A.D.<sup>4</sup>. The legend had it that Indra had had a son borne by a human princess, named *Ketumālā*, whom

1. *Vrah* in Old Khmer; it meant all "illustrious beings", then later all "top-rank sacred beings", mostly the Buddha. As a sacred prefix, it is applied to both living creatures and inanimate objects.

2. The bulk of Sanskrit words in Khmer has survived the decline of Brahmanism in Cambodia.

3. A 10th c. Khmer temple, situated South to Angkor-Vat, was later named *Brah Indr-Kosiy* (usual French transcription: Preah Einkosei), which also accommodated a Buddhist monastery called *Vatt Brah Indr-Kosiy*.

4. Cf. S. Pou, *Note sur la date du Poème d'Angkor Vat*, in JA, 263, 1-2 (1975), pp. 119-124. Also S. Pou, *Etudes sur le Rāmakerti (XVI<sup>e</sup>-XVII<sup>e</sup> siècles)*, EFEO, vol. CXI, Paris, 1977, pp. 39-40 and 58-59.

he kept and reared in Traitriṅs. As it turned out, the gods could no longer bear the smell of this half-human creature, and put pressure on Indra to send him down to terrestrial world where he should belong to. The aggrieved Indra was compelled to part with his beloved son who, incidentally, was moaning about his having to leave all the pleasures of Traitriṅs and especially the blissful comfort of Bejayant. Indra sought to mitigate their sorrows, and ordered the divine architect *Bisṇukār*, i.e. Viśvakarman (c. *infra*, II, 2), to accompany Ketumālā and build him a palace on the model of Bejayant. That is, in the Khmer's mind, the origin of the city of Angkor. The legendary son of Indra, Ketumālā, is more known to, and cherished by, the people at large than the actual builder of Angkor (cf. *infra*, II, 2), together with his assistant and architect Bisṇukār.

In brief, Lord Indra, or *Indrādhirāj*, is held as a divine ruler of heavenly Traitriṅs, and has strong connections with mundane world.

2. *Brahmā*. Like Indra, he belongs to the Buddhist heavens, actually to the « Sixteen-tiered » heaven above Indra's abode, named *Soḷas* /saolɔh/. But while the name « Indra » is only borne by the chief of Indraloka, « Brahma », or in Khmer *Brahm* /prum/ applies to all the denizens of Brahmaloaka. These are lofty gods, verily pure and austere, mostly involved in deep meditation. Among their various abodes, *Suddhāvās*, *Bhavagg* and *Akaniṭṭh* are the most familiar to people, as evidenced by both literature and folklore. Also, there is a hierarchy among the Brahm-s; the top-ones are called *Mahābrahm*-s, the most celebrated of them being *Sanāṅkumār* and *Sahampatī*. One should remember that canonical *Sahampatī* on a visit to the Buddha, begged him to preach his Law to all creatures for their welfare. This legendary event has had a tremendous impact on Khmer culture. The Theravādin community of all times re-enacts it, in real life, during monastic sermons. These take place regularly on the holy days of Buddhist lunar calendar, or during other festivals at people's request. The officiating monk, supposed to impersonate the Buddha, would never get up to occupy the preaching-chair till the first upāsaka, acting as *Sahampatī*, recites beautiful verses inviting him to preach to the audience, for « the spiritual welfare » of all.

Thus, the Brahm-s in heavens are faithful servants of the Buddha, like Indra. But unlike him, they stand quite high up and aloof in *lokuttara*-sphere, without any mundane involvement.

Finally, however deeply venerated and held in awe by the Khmer, Indrādhirāj as well as the Brahm-s are not specifically worshipped by them.

## II. *Through the Epic and its implications*

The epic tradition is mainly represented by the Rāmāyaṇa in Cambodia, as on the mainland of S.E. Asia. Much has been said already about the Cambodian Rāmāyaṇa, named *Rāmakerti*, or « The Glory of Rām »<sup>5</sup>. Let us recall that the essential of Vālmīki, inherited by the Khmer, was re-interpreted by Buddhist poets who strongly emphasized the notion of Karmic retribution to build up a new spiritual system. In addition, the whole structure was gradually permeated with magic along with the passing of time.

1. First of all, one must bear in mind that Cambodian *Rām* was conceived as a man, son of a king (cf. the Buddha), re-incarnating « god » Viṣṇu (cf. *infra*, 2). Secondly, in mediaeval Cambodia the Sanskrit epic notion of *avatāra* had lost all its meaning along with the bygone worship of the Brahmanic god. Thus, Viṣṇu had had his cult dropped off, and his name deleted from mediaeval culture. He was only remembered as *Nārāya(ṇa)*, incidentally a « god » in the Khmer sense, i.e. one of the highest-ranking beings in supernatural world whose members are arranged into a neat hierarchy comprising common ghosts at the bottom and the most sacred, divine, personalities at the top. Interestingly enough, all of them are more or less involved in magic. In other words, a god can be terrestrial or celestial, but he belongs to the same invisible world as other spirits, whereby he occupies the top-tier. As such, *Nārāy* has no regular cult, but he may be called upon in some particular circumstances. Thus, in *Rāmakerti*, *Nārāy* was a divinity abiding in the Ocean. He was « invited » by his fellow-gods and ṛṣi to be « re-

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5. Cf. S. Pou, *Rāmakerti (XVI<sup>e</sup>-XVII<sup>e</sup> siècles)*, EFEO, vol. CX, Paris, 1977; S. Pou, *Etudes sur le Rāmakerti...*, *op. cit.*

born » (cf. the Bodhisattva) on the earth, as a prince, to fight the wicked demons headed by Rāvaṇa <sup>6</sup>.

2. The name *Viṣṇu*, or in Modern Khmer *Bisṇu*, would have been entirely eradicated if it were not for the human namesake of the god. In accordance with the Cambodian wont of bestowing posthumous names on deceased sovereigns, King Sūryavarman II, the builder of Angkor-Vat (c. *supra*, I, 1), received the name *Paramaviṣṇuloka*, « He who went to the Viṣṇu's world ». This name survived the fall of the whole city of Angkor (15th c.) and notwithstanding all the subsequent turmoil, destruction and ruin, it remained vivid in the conscience of people, leastwise in the learned ones', as evidenced by the epigraphy. The temple was thereby called *Brah Bisṇulok*, a metonymical name to be understood as « That of Paramaviṣṇuloka ». At the same time, poets chanted nostalgically the glorious past of the city, with the effect that the same Bisṇu spread outside the temple area itself, and went to the above mentioned legend of Angkor-Vat (above, I, 1). Viśvakarman, the divine architect carrying out god Indra's commission to build Angkor, was named analogically \*Bisṇukarman, then *Bisṇukār* who eventually became the patron saint of craftsmen (cf. *infra*, 3).

In brief, any mention of *Bisṇu* in connection with Angkor does not refer to the Indian god but to King Paramaviṣṇuloka.

3. In ancient Cambodia, Śiva was the most prominent Brahmanic god, worshipped under various forms, including his liṅga. According to my epigraphic data, he was very rarely called *Śiva*, but more often *Śaṅkara*. In fact, Khmer people of old knew him mostly by his specific names, viz. compound words ending with *-śvara*, to be understood « The Lord so-and-so » or « The Lord of so-and-so ». For instance, he was named:

- *Kedāreśvara*, « The Lord of Kedāra »
- *Bhadreśvara*, « The auspicious Lord »
- *Jalāṅgeśvara*, « The Lord with a water-body » (cf. the liṅga)

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6. See a Classical Khmer treatise of cosmogony in MS EFEO, N° 107, which, incidentally, I have analysed in my paper *Portrait of Rām in Cambodian (Khmer) tradition*, read at the International Seminar on Rāmāyaṇa in Lucknow, 1986 (in the press).

— *Vṛddheśvara*, « The venerable Lord »

— Etc.<sup>7</sup>

It is common knowledge that Śiva, before coming to Cambodia, was already called by the Indians *Īśvara*, « The Lord », or even *Maheśvara*, « The Great Lord »<sup>8</sup>. But from epigraphic evidence, all these *īśvara*-compounds looked very popular in ancient Cambodia, too. They give us good reason for stating that *Īśvara* was the most popular, if not exclusive, name of the god in actual usages, endowed with a potential energy which helped it survive after the decline of Brahmanism.

Indeed, in post-Angkorian times, the only name of the god was *Īsūr*. In the Rāmakerti, the god still held a strong position, although he played second role. The divine king of Mount Kailās, he was the chief of all *ṛṣi*-s, now called *iṣi*-s. Ever since, he has been depicted, like all *iṣi*-s, as an ascetic with long pointed beard and wearing his hair into a top-knot. When Rām was in some predicaments, he called forth *Īsūr* as a referee and begged him to solve problems. On this account, Śiva was called *Mahā-Īsūr* or *Parama-Īsūr*.

On other occasions, he was named *Paramagrū*, a most significant epithet and name. Indeed, in the Khmer culture, a *grū* (< Skt. *guru*) is « one who is endowed with knowledge and capable to pass it on to his followers », and this applies to « teacher, doctor, quack, magician ». All the *iṣi*-s were forest-dwellers; through asceticism, they developed a magical power reflected in their healing practice and the martial art, misnamed in Khmer *silpasāstr*, which they readily imparted to their pupils. Their master *Īsūr* stood, then, as *Paramagrū*, « The supreme Teacher » and as a matter of fact « The supreme Magician ».

Practically, he is worshipped — unlike Indra and Brahma — by people up and down the country, at different stages of their lives and on different festive occasions. For instance, he was one of the « Five Brahmanic gods », *pañcakṣetr*, kept in the Royal Palace for

7. Cf. also K. BHATTACHARYA, *Les religions brahmaniques dans l'ancien Cambodge, d'après l'épigraphie et l'iconographie*, EFEO, vol. XLIX, Paris, 1961, pp. 51-56.

8. Cf. E. W. HOPKINS, *Epic Mythology*, Strassburg, Karl J. Trübner, 1915, p. 219; J. GONDA, *Notes on Names and the Name of God in ancient India*, North-Holland Publishing Company, Amsterdam-London, 1970, pp. 69-70.

official regular worship. He is invoked by elephant-hunters before the hunt, as well as by a theatre-company before the first performance. He is the patron of artists and craftsmen jointly with Bisṣukār (cf. *supra*, 2). He also shares at times the worship with Nārāy, Umā, and other spirits. He is the chief warrant of all healers, therefore he insures welfare to humans.

4. Śiva's son, Ganeśa, shares the magical science of his father. His current name in Cambodia is *Bhaghanes* (< Skt. *Vighneśa*) in literature as in folklore. Iconographically, he has preserved his original features, half-human, half-elephant. He is mostly held as a local guardian-spirit, the protector of a community. In this capacity, he is sometimes assimilated with the famous Khmer local genius, *anak tā*, whose shrine is a landmark of most villages. Consequently, his ancient statues, scattered after the decline of Brahmanism, were sometimes collected by villagers, then trimmed up to be used as representing local guardian-spirits, and put up likewise, i.e. in hut-like shrines.

In classical Rāmakertī, he played the part of the guardian-spirit of Laṅkā, keeping watch at the gate of the city. And according to the court tradition, he stood as the divine head of elephant-hunters.

As the master of magic in particular, he is called *Siddhi-Suost*. To my mind, this name was made after one of the usual opening formulae of magical texts, « *Siddhi-svastī* », which conveys the pursuit of « supernatural power and success ». His smallest plastic representations are kept, or worn by people as the best amulets.

Finally, the character of *Siddhi-Suost* stands as the main protagonist of a myth-cycle pertaining to magic<sup>9</sup>.

### III. Secularization

The foregoing has unveiled a long and slow processing of Brahmanic mythology, leading to a steady indigenization of the divine protagonists. So far each of them has preserved a perso-

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9. Cf. J. ELLUL, *Le mythe de Ganeśa: le Ganeśa cambodgien, un mythe d'origine de la magie*, in « *Seksa Khmer* » 1-2, Paris, 1980, pp. 69-154.



nality — even in iconography as exemplified by Ganeśa — although their respective identity has changed a great deal owing to the new *Weltanschauung* of Theravādin Khmers.

But other Brahmanic gods of ancient Cambodia have been, as it were, less fortunate in this respect. They were first stripped of their divine essence — even by Khmer standards — then some were fitted into the new system wherever they proved useful and socially effective.

1. One group of gods made their exit quite early from Cambodia's Brahmanic pantheon, probably because they never had a spiritual key-role in the past. However, after fading away as such, they left their prints in the memory of the community through their names and their functions. And the more so if the two elements were kept together un-dissociated; they could then be recycled by the speakers in need of lexical expansion.

Thus, *Baladeva*, the ploughman-god, lent his name to the « Minister of agriculture », and his « Service », hence Middle Khmer *baladeb*.

*Vaiśravaṇa* ceased to be the god of riches. His name, *baisrab* in Middle Khmer, was however applied to « rice », the cereal viewed as the « product of the earth », and as « an entity maintaining human life on earth ».

*Sarasvatī*, the ancient Cambodia's celebrated goddess of art and eloquence, patron of all students, after being rejected from the Khmer pantheon, lent her name to « students », understood as « educated young men dedicated to the royal service ». In mediaeval Cambodia, this name was eventually confined to the lexicon. In fact, it had produced several lexems which fell into two groups:

a) a noun, *suostī*, meaning « young apprentice-mantrī in charge of rolls of corvée-men »;

b) a verb, *sraṭī*, « to command, to speak with eloquence », from which derived regressively *stī* « to speak, to command, to reprimand / rebuke ». *Stī* itself produced a nominal derivative, *saṃtī* « eloquence, speech »<sup>10</sup>.

10. Cf. S. Pou, *Sarasvatī dans la culture khmère*, in « Bulletin d'Etudes Indiennes », 4, Paris (1986), pp. 321-339.

God *Yama* had kept a vague and dim figure of judge in hell. But Theravādin eschatology was now more concerned with the working of karmic retribution, than with the threat of effective punishments of evil-doers in hell. In other words, the pragmatic Khmer Buddhists rather dreaded the action of *yamapāl-s*, « the hell-wardens », while holding unanimously the Buddha as the main judge of their deeds. The name *Yamarāj*, now redundant, was secularized, and applied to the « Minister of justice », nowadays written either *yama-* or *yomarāj*.

As for *Skanda*, the young god also named *Kumār*, he was too involved in healing sick children to disappear completely. His name was wholly secularized, hence the modern word *skand*, « convulsions » as disorder of infants, then any such disorder in all creatures.

The most fantastic story concerns *kāma*, Skt. lexical item and name of the god of love. It was a well-known noun in ancient Cambodia, as one of the elements of *trivarga*, thus meaning « desire, longing after, pleasure, love... ». Predictably, austere Theravāda could not accomodate such a concept, especially in the sense of « sensual love, sexual enjoyment ». It banished it from *trivarga*<sup>11</sup>, and cast out god *Kāma* altogether. But the other side of Theravāda, made of kind- and open-mindedness, tolerated effusive expression in poetic and lyric creations. Especially in lyric poetry, lovers went on singing their griefs and joys and the part played therein by a « god » of love whom they addressed as *Kāmadev*, and who is still very popular nowadays.

2. As for gods associated with elements, they lost their Brahmanic status very easily. As hinted earlier, animism has been living side by side with Indian religions all through the centuries, and has never ceased to cultivate a certain worship of the elements: sun, moon, sky, water, earth, fire,... When Brahmanic gods of this type were made redundant, their corporal envelops became namesakes for Khmer words designating the elements, conveying however a poetical or spiritual connotation. Thus:

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11. Cf. S. Pou, *Dharma and Trivarga in the Khmer language*, in 'Rtam', XI-XV, Lucknow, 1983, pp. 289-297.

- *Āditya* became *braḥ ādity* « the sun » (supernatural entity)
- *Candra* » *braḥ candr* « the moon » (poetical)
- *Vāyu* » *braḥ bāy* « the wind » (lyrical and magic)
- *Varuṇa* » *braḥ biruṇ* « the rain » (with supernatural force)

God *Agni*, however, went through different fate. The name was wiped out quite early from High Middle Khmer, and whatever remained of the god himself was called *Braḥ Aggī* (Pāli form). It must be added that this Brahmanic vestige occurred only in literature and art, in other words was remembered only by the elite<sup>12</sup>. In reality, the anthropomorphic god of old and his Skt. name were engulfed altogether in the new Khmer spiritual system, as evidenced by more popular literature and other treatises on ancient customs. Whether at the Royal Palace or in any village or home, only the « Sacred Fire » was worshipped, under his pyromorphic representation and his Khmer name *Braḥ Bhloēñ*, reminding us of Old Khmer *Vraḥ Vleñ*<sup>13</sup>. Thus, the cult of the « Sacred Fire » has completed a real cycle, and speaks of a perennial indigenous tradition — akin to other S. E. Asian traditions — which now combines both Khmer belief and practice and whatever remains of the ancient Brahmanic mythology and cult.

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The first scholars — historians and archaeologists — to study, and write on, the history of ancient Cambodia about half a century ago, never had the opportunity to go beyond the limits of it (ca. 14th c.). Willy-nilly they left us indirectly the uncanny *impression* that Brahmanism with its sects, its gods, its religious tenets and cults, sank into oblivion after the collapse of Angkorian Empire. This mere impression has been unfortunately stressed and elaborated upon by the following generation of khmerologists who, for lack of deep linguistic and cultural knowledge, set up a clear-cut

12. Cf. S. Pou, *Rāmakerti* ..., *op. cit.*, 1977, p. 5.

13. Cf. S. Pou, *A propos de ramās bhloēñ, ou "Rhinocéros du Feu"*, in 'Saksa Khmer' 6, Paris, 1983, pp. 3-9.

and impervious line between ancient and modern Cambodia. They would readily substantiate this in pointing out the negative action, or passiveness, of Theravāda, its lack of dynamism, its unconcern over the glorious legacy of Brahmanism. At the same time, the first modern anthropologists of S. E. Asia set their mind on countering any excess of view held by indologists regarding the Indian influence upon the peninsula and the islands. In the process, they all reached the same result, which is a tight and strict compartmentalization of history, undeniably unrealistic, since it conceals the true evolution of cultures.

And yet, no culture ever dies off overnight! History, if one cares to explore it deeply and in all fairness, has always shown that a passing culture leaves something behind in the following one, and so forth. And the more so if it has proved overwhelming as the Sanskrit Brahmanic heritage in Cambodia.

Fortunately, however, the last two decades have witnessed new trends in research and genuine progress in scholarship in two fields: linguistics and anthropology. Research has thus been mainly based on firsthand data represented either by intensive text-reading or direct field-investigation. The results thereof concurrently reveal the existence of many genuine vestiges of Brahmanism, congenially fitted in the Theravādin culture of modern times.

I have had many opportunities to disclose my findings on this score, and to insist on how linguistics helps unearth Brahmanic elements rooted in ancient Cambodia, now assimilated with Theravādin culture. Alongside, the anthropologist ANG Chouléan made for the first time a comprehensive survey (1982-86) of the supernatural world of the Khmers, whereby he brilliantly analyses the modern cultural system made of harmonious blending of Buddhism (Theravāda, Tantrism), Brahmanism, and indigenous animist beliefs<sup>14</sup>. In the present paper, I have focused my attention on the particular subject of Brahmanic gods, and the ways they were allowed to survive and to have an active part in the Cambodian Theravādin community. A few were adopted by the Buddhists because they suited well their new world-representation. Several

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14. Cf. Ch. ANG, *Les êtres surnaturels dans la religion populaire khmère*, Cedoreck, Paris, 1986.

others owed their survival to a transfer into magic, therefore joined happily the most popular and active sphere of supernatural world, whilst a few were rescued from the sinking Brahmanism by linguistic and institutional usages. And this is one of the best illustrations of the present-day multifaceted Khmer culture.